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Heart Health Warning Signs

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Some young black women who are at risk for heart disease may be in danger long before test results reveal a common warning sign, according to a University of Dayton researcher.

"African-American women are at significantly higher risk for developing cardiovascular and metabolic diseases than their white counterparts, but disease onset appears to be delayed," said Jayne Brahler, a professor and research coordinator in the University of Dayton's doctor of physical therapy program.

"As February is American Heart Month, now may be a good time to remind these women of the importance of adopting healthy lifestyle habits even before negative risk indicators are evident," she said.

Brahler recently studied 97 black mothers and their biological daughters, ages 21-50 and 5-17, respectively, and found the group was able to eat considerable amounts of dietary fats and carry excess body weight without elevating their total cholesterol levels, a leading indicator of risk for heart disease.

The *Journal of Exercise Physiology Online* published Brahler's findings in February 2007.

Diets high in saturated fat are known to increase the amount of low density lipoproteins (LDL) — also known as "bad" cholesterol — in the blood, and decrease the amount of high density lipoproteins (HDL), also known as "good" cholesterol. High levels of LDL can lead to the build up of plaque in the arteries beginning in early childhood.

But Brahler's research provided evidence that cholesterol levels for overweight black women who consume high levels of dietary fat remain within a normal range to a later age compared to white women.

Cholesterol levels for black women have been shown to increase between the ages of 65 and 74 years. The average age for the mothers in Brahler's research was about 34 years, so it is possible that the detrimental effects of a high fat diet and excess body weight take longer to show up and were not yet evident in the relatively young population in the study, she said.

The American Heart Association reports that in 2005, 49 percent of black females in the U.S. had cardiovascular disease compared to 35 percent of white females.

Cardiovascular diseases, including stroke, are the leading cause of death in the United States. To promote awareness and urge Americans to fight these diseases, Congress declared February "American Heart Month" in 1963.

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.